

Dr. Leticia RODRÍGUEZ-FERNÁNDEZ

Universidad Antonio Nebrija. Spain. lrodrigu@nebrija.es

Junk News and "disinformation media" in the 10-N election campaign

Junk News y "medios de desinformación" en la campaña electoral del 10-N

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Abstract

Junk news is part of the disinformation ecosystem employed to modify and influence citizens during election campaigns. This research analyses the content produced by several Spanish pages, identified as "disinformation media", both before and during the November 10 election campaign in Spain. Those Spanish websites that usually distribute junk content, that is to say, partisan, stemming from an extreme ideology and with a deeply propagandistic approach, were identified by means of the tool Junk News Aggregator of the Oxford Internet Institute. The aim was to disclose their political content agenda, the authorship of their publications, the treatment accorded to political groups and their representatives, and also to identify whether any variation in their activity occurred over the electoral period. Strategies of content and common publications, of a partisan approach, lack of identification in the authorship and a clear ideological bias in favour of Vox were noted.

Keywords

Disinformation; propaganda; junk news; fake news; political communication.

Resumen

Las noticias basura, junk news, forman parte del ecosistema desinformativo utilizado para alterar e influenciar a los ciudadanos durante las campañas electorales. Esta investigación analiza el contenido producido por varias páginas españolas, identificadas como "medios de desinformación", antes y durante la campaña electoral del 10 de noviembre en España. A través de la herramienta Junk News Aggregator del Instituto de Internet de Oxford se han identificado las webs españolas que suelen distribuir contenido basura, es decir partidista, de ideología extrema y con enfoque claramente propagandístico. Se pretende conocer cuál es su agenda de contenidos políticos, la autoría de sus publicaciones, el tratamiento realizado a las formaciones políticas y sus representantes e identificar si hay variación en su actividad durante el periodo electoral. Se observan estrategias de contenido y publicaciones comunes, de enfoque partidista, falta de identificación en la autoría y un claro sesgo ideológico a favor de Vox.

Palabras clave

Desinformación; propaganda; junk news; fake news; comunicación política.

1. Introduction

Disinformation plays a leading role in political news due to its effectiveness and capacity to influence citizens, which has been demonstrated in different international electoral processes. It has been shown that fake news has a more significant impact on political content than terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018).

Political consultants contextualise disinformation "in the crisis of trust and delegitimation of institutions, political parties, and the media, citizens' lack of critical awareness, and the new orchestrated structures that allow fake content to spread and go viral quickly (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019:5). Although this phenomenon has been long-established, it is recognised as a concern for their clients (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019).

Verifiers' activities have become more necessary than ever in election campaigns. The media and other organisations that collaborate and add value to the process, usually subscribe to verifiers' activities. The study of beliefs is a fundamental line of research in the fight against disinformation, as is verification. Currently, most studies highlight conformity bias (Asch, 1951) as one of the reasons why disinformation is effective; this is because we tend to remember the information that confirms our beliefs and ignore that which is different from them.

Moravec, Minas, and Dennis (2019) analysed 80 university students' capacity to discern true and false information through electroencephalograms (EEGs). It was shown that they were more likely to believe the contents that aligned with their political beliefs. Recent studies have observed that we do not pay attention to the argumentative quality of those who have different opinions to ours. This attitude is more pronounced in more polarized people; we refuse to change our view and tend to reinforce our beliefs (Kappes, Harvey, Lohrenz, Monatgue, and Sharot, 2020).

Confirmation bias is more pronounced in the digital environment due to the "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2017), which is generated by the algorithms on social networks and search engines, it provides personalized results based on tastes, preferences and each user's behaviour. These "social bubbles" are optimal for disinformation and polarized discourse (Nikolov, Oliveira, Flammini, and Menczer, 2015; DiFranco and Gloria- García, 2017).

1.1 Junk news in election campaigns

In the study of fake news, the Oxford Internet Institute (OII)'s Computational Propaganda Project has created the specific categorisation-Junk News for partisan disinformation. "Junk news" is defined as different forms of propaganda, stemming from an extreme ideology, as well as hyperpartisan or conspiratorial political news and information (Bolsover and Howard, 2019; Gallacher, Barash, Howard and Kelly, 2018; Howard, Bolsover, Kollanyi, Bradshaw and Neudert, 2017; Howard, Woolley, and Calo, 2018; Woolley and Howard, (2017).

To foster media literacy, its team has developed the tool Junk News Aggregator. This search engine provides information about the content publicly uploaded on Facebook by junk news sources, based on the following criteria (Liotsiou, Kollanyi, and Howard, 2019).

Table 1. Criteria used to determine junk news in the Junk News Aggregator tool

Professionalism	These sources do not comply with optimal standards and professional journalism practices. They do not provide clear information about the real authors, editors, and owners. They lack transparency and accountability and do not rectify the information which is found to be inaccurate.
Style	These sources use emotive language, hyperbole, attacks, misleading headlines, excessive capitalisation, unsafe generalizations, and logical fallacies, moving images, and many pictures and mobilisation memes.
Credibility	These sources are based on false information and conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are often employed strategically. They inform without consulting multiple sources and do not check facts. The sources and norms of production are usually unreliable.
Bias: left bias, right bias	Partial, ideologically biased, or hyper-partisan information. News coverage includes commentary on opinion and right incendiary views

Forgery	These sources imitate established news information. They forge sources, brands, and style strategies, and junk content is disguised as news. It references agencies and credible sources, and the headlines follow the same style as news, including date, time, and location.
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Source: Liotsiou, Kollanyi and Howard (2019).

For a website to be classified as a source of junk news, it must comply with at least three or more of these criteria. As a reference, the study that was carried out in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections demonstrated that more than 27,000 junk contents were shared on Facebook and Twitter (Marchal, Kollanyi, Neudert, and Howard, 2019).

Junk news "is dangerous, not because it is false, but because it saturates the public debate, leaving no space to other discussions, reducing the richness of public debate, preventing more important stories from being heard. Like rumours, junk news proliferates by transmission and transformation" (Venturini, 2019: 3).

1.2 Definition and influence of the "disinformation media."

In the disinformation ecosystem, several factors are at play, which contribute to its functioning: malicious content, the interaction between fake accounts and bots that encourage the spread of disinformation, micro-segmented advertising that drives content to go viral, and users who share content organically, etc. However, this content is usually sustained by a web page that looks like news. These sites could be called disinformation websites or media because they adopt the same look and form as the media, spread disinformation, and false contents, which are distorted or contain evaluative judgments that seek to benefit a political or social cause.

Some investigations have linked the influence of these fake news pages to the media's news agenda, especially the information related to certain political actors (Guoy and Vargo, 2018). Likewise, these websites also serve business interests. During the *Punica* case investigation, it was revealed that its facilitator Alejandro de Pedro, provider and owner of the digital reputation company Eico Online Reputation Management, had worked for large companies such as *Telefónica*, *Sacyr*, *Bankia*, *Mediaset*, *IDC Salud*, and *Real Madrid*. Eico had 60 websites, which under the guise of independent media, published positive information to improve their clients' digital reputation. In addition to helping them position their data better, the network was flooded with positive information, allowing clients to reduce the impact and exposure of negative news and commentary. In the case of *Telefónica* and *Bankia*, up to 50 positive news items were published each week. The news was based on the corporations' press releases, and different versions were written for various media (Olmo, 2015).

In 2017, several brands withdrew their advertising from the *Mediterráneo Digital* website after a user started a campaign denouncing one of its headlines that insulted women. Some media such as *Cadena Ser* compared this site to *Infowars* or *Breitbart News*, websites that spread disinformation about Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential elections in the United States (La Ser, 2017). In the case of *Breitbart News*, Steve Bannon, ex-advisor to Donald Trump, was formerly the CEO of the website.

Rodríguez-Ferrándiz points out that (2019:5), based on the data collected by Buzzfeed.org "in the three-months leading up to the U.S elections, fraudulent sites and extremely radical and partisan blogs (such as *Breitbart*, *Right Wing News*, and *Freedom Daily*) spread false news regarding the elections that had a more significant impact on Facebook than the authentic electoral news from accredited media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NBC News*, and others.

In Europe, the disinformation media do not seem to pose a threat when it comes to direct traffic. According to the study *Measuring the reach of "fake news" and online disinformation in Europe*, the total time dedicated to fake news websites is less than the time devoted to news websites.

However, users' interaction on social networks produces more fake content than factual ones. Users' level of engagement on Facebook created by a small number of fake news media coincided with or exceeded that from the most popular media outlets. In France, a disinformation site generated an average of over 11 million interactions per month, five times more than the most established news outlets. Fortunately, most propaganda sites are not as socially successful: the researchers highlight that both in France and Italy, fake news media do not generate as many interactions as established news outlets (Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, and Nielsen, 2018).

In Spain pages such as *España Diario*, among others, had over 3 million followers in January 2019, these sites are also linked to other websites such as *España Sucesos*, *EliempoenEspaña.com*, "websites that feedback contents based on clickbait" (Magallón, 2019: 123).

The case of *Digital Sevilla* stands out; it is a page that registers high levels of traffic on the website, contributing to its funding through programmatic advertising. In February 2018, it reached an audience of 496 000 unique users, positioning itself ahead of real media and leading media in the province such as *Diario de Sevilla*, which has around 50, 000 users (El País, 2019).

Previous investigations have highlighted these websites' activity and their relation to specific political parties, such is the case of the site *Caso Aislado* and its connections to Vox. (Hernández and Fernández, 2019). Also, the media has denounced the false identities of several journalists on sites such as *Periodista Digital*, where they appeared under the pseudonyms "Ivan Rastik," "Francisco Lorenson," and "Paula Dumas," and whose images had been taken from databases. (Sarabia, 2019).

These sources of disinformation could continue to gain traction in the future due to the continuous and unstoppable incorporation of technologies into daily routines. Mobile applications and virtual assistants provide results based on algorithms, but these do not feature verifications or ethical settings. *Google Discover* provides results from websites such as *Mediterráneo Digital*, *Caso Aislado*, *Periodista Digital*, or *DiarioGol*, sites that are recognised by experts as disinformation sites (Castillo, 2019).

2. Methodology

This study aims first to identify those websites that produce political disinformation in Spain and then analyse their activity before and during the Spanish presidential election campaign on 10 November 2019.

This analysis was done using the Oxford Internet Institute's (OII's) *Junk News Aggregator* tool, which was created to make public the partisan information published in Europe and the U.K. in English, German, Spanish, French, Polish, Italian and Swedish.

Firstly, to identify junk news pages, a search for all content in Spanish was carried out between 1 June and 4 September 2019, this is when the last update was indicated in its register. The tool detected a total of 198 contents from the following websites:

Table 2. The volume of contents on disinformation sites using the Junk News Aggregator tool

Websites	Number of publications registered on Junk News Aggregator
Mediterraneodigital.com	156
PeriodistaDigital.com	11
Eldiestro.es	9
Diarioalcazar.com	8
Diariopatriota.com	4
Latribunadeespana.com	4
Elmunicipio.es	3
DonDiario.com	2
ElcorreodeMadrid.com	1

Source: authors

The tool *Similarweb* (<https://www.similarweb.com/>) has been employed To know the digital relevance of each page,, which provides traffic and audience data. *Similarweb* is a paid application, with over ten years of experience, whose analysis methodology gathers and contrasts information from four different sources: 1) the website owners' direct traffic (2) information from external providers, (3) public data sources (indexing) and (4) anonymous behaviour data.

Through this application, only results from *Mediterraneodigital.com*, *PeriodistaDigital.com*, *Eldiestro.es*, *Diariopatriota.com*, and *ElMunicipio.es* have been obtained, those webpages that did not present traffic data have been excluded from the final analysis, as they were considered to be insufficiently representative.

Two periods of content analysis have been established after obtaining this initial snapshot. The first period was before the election campaign, between 14 and 20 of October 2019, and the second one during the general election campaign, which was reduced to only a week of campaigning, between 1 and 8 of November. In both weeks, the contents published in the "political" section or when this section was not

included in the "national" or "Spain" section were obtained, the date of publication, author, title, and information link were identified.

It is assumed that these media, which have already been categorised as propaganda by the Oxford Internet Institute, could increase the publication of junk news during the election campaign to influence it for or against some political parties. Therefore, a qualitative and quantitative content analysis was carried out on the information gathered to compare both periods.

For this purpose, the following research objectives are presented:

- Compare the sites' traffic (through secondary sources) to determine their relevance
- Examine its thematic agenda in the political and/or national sections
- Register the authorship of the publications
- Identify the political actors most present in the contents
- Examine the media's assessment of such political actors.
- Compare the two periods to see if there are changes during the election period.

The items used by Hernández and Fernández (2019: 41) have been taken as a reference to determine the units of analysis. Their analysis is based on analysing headlines (Andreu, 2012) and the concerns disclosed by the CIS barometer (November 2018). We chose this categorisation because these authors' study also addresses the disinformation website (*Caso Aislado*). Therefore it could be correlated with this work. The information was categorised manually on the data collection sheet. The units of analysis used and the type of analysis applied to each are indicated below:

Quantitative analysis:

- Catalonia
- Feminism
- Immigration: public aid, crimes committed by immigrants, Islam.
- Patriotism
- Vox attacks from the media, others attacks or assault

Quantitative and Qualitative analysis:

- Presence of different political actors and the news coverage of them (positive, negative or neutral)

It is worth noting that the first week coincided with the publication of the sentence of the trial of the Catalanian Independence leaders, which also marks the thematic agenda of the sites analysed.

3. Results

3.1 Traffic comparison of disinformation sites

Regarding the audience analysis, the website with the most significant impact is *PeriodostaDigital*, followed by *Mediterráneo Digital*, *Diario Patriota*, *El Diestro*, and finally, *El Municipio*.

In general terms, their traffic is mainly direct. In the case of social networks' traffic, Facebook, and Twitter, these are the networks that gain a bigger audience from it. Regarding the reference traffic ("Referral"), i.e., the audience coming from other websites is quite dispersed, with few forums in common such as burbuja.info, meneame.net, and dolcacatalunya.com

Table 3. Results of the analysis extracted from SimilarWeb

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2019 (INFORMATION TAKEN FROM SIMILAR WEB)					
Media	Number of visitors		Main traffic channels	Social Traffic	Reference Traffic
	Oct-2019	nov.			
Periodista Digital	46.59M		· Direct (54.54%)	· Facebook (66.94%)	· inrelaciones.com (38.45%)
			· Organic traffic (35.28%)	· Twitter (29.61%)	· meneame.net (19.38%)
			· Social (8.55%)	· Youtube (2.61%)	· burbuja.info (10.26%)
			· Referrals (1.29%)	· WhatsApp Webapp (0.44%)	· gab.com (10.07%)
			· Email (0.24%)	· DailyMotion (0.25%)	· accesohub.acceso.com (3.30%)
			· Others (0.16%)		
Mediterráneo Digital	1.462M		· Direct (37.95%)	· Facebook (51.76%)	· burbuja.info (38.11%)
			· Social (36%)	· Twitter (47.16%)	· gab.com (26.06%)
			· Organic traffic (23.79%)	· Youtube (0.66%)	· dolcacatalunya.com (21.03%)
			· Referrals (1.94%)	· Instagram (0.16%)	· hispachan.org (7.42%)
			· Email (0.31%)	· LinkedIn (0.13%)	· forobeta.com (5.26%)
			· Others (0.12%)		
Diario Patriota	924,508		· Direct (38.54%)	· Facebook (86.32%)	· burbuja.info (49.62%)
			· Social (38.43%)	· Twitter (13.43%)	· gab.com (45.17%)
			· Organic traffic (21.06%)	· Youtube (0.25%)	· meneame.net (1.94%)
			· Referrals (1.95%)		· foro.musclecoop.com (1.94%)
				· dolcacatalunya.com (1.33%)	
El Diestro	765,708		· Social (34.69%)	· Facebook (58.07%)	· gab.com (51.38%)
			· Direct (34.52%)	· Twitter (31.44%)	· meneame.net (33.38%)
			· Organic traffic (20.56%)	· Youtube (9.72%)	· feedly.com (8.96%)
			· Referrals (9.35%)	· Vkontakte (0.51%)	· burbuja.info (5.74%)
		· Email (0.86%)	· LinkedIn (0.25%)	· cotilleando.com (0.18%)	
El Municipio	54,090		· Organic Traffic (69.55%)	· Facebook (70.91%)	agrotterra.com (100%)
			· Direct (17.04%)	· Twitter (22.74%)	
			· Social (12.21%)	· Youtube (6.34%)	
			· Referrals (1.20%)		

Source: authors

3.2 Website analysis. Structure of the contents.

The website that has the most content in the periods analysed is *Periodista Digital*, which had 135 publications in the election campaign week and 107 during the comparative week in October. It is followed by *El Diestro*, which has less than half: 48 in October and 66 in November. *El Municipio* is the least active website, with less than ten items per week.

Although there is a higher number of publications during the election campaign week, this increase is not significant since the website with the highest number of contents, *Periodista Digital*, had a rise of only 28 items, arriving at an average of 4 more daily publications. Nevertheless, the global result is significant since, during the election campaign week, the five web sites would have spread 299 contents, yielding an average of 42.7 daily publications, which were likely to contain disinformation. This activity is similar to the previous week of analysis. Therefore we can establish the comparative framework, in which there were 240 publications, a daily average of 34.2.

Table 4. Content published by each website.

Web page	The activity log of the analyzed pages			
	Week 14 to 20 October	Average content published daily	Week 1 to 8 November (election campaign)	Average content published daily
Periodista Digital	107	15.2	135	19.2
El Diestro	48	6.8	66	9.4
El Patriota	49	7	54	7.7
Mediterráneo Digital	26	3.7	39	5.5
El Municipio	9	1.2	3	0.4

Source: authors

Regarding the authors, most of the items feature “editorial staff” or the name of the media in their byline. In *Mediterráneo Digital*, this appears in 80% of the total number of publications, in *El Patriota* 55.3%, and in the case of *El Diestro* 58%. *El Municipio*, which is the page with the least number of contents, has no nominal authors and the name of the web page features in all the bylines.

Periodista Digital is the exception, as the name of the media appears in the byline in only 5.3% of contents, whereas Francisco Lorenson is credited in most of the publications' bylines. Francisco Lorenson is one of the false identities denounced by Eldiario.es, as well as Paula Dumas and Iván Rastik, who are also credited as authors on this site. However, it is the only website that registers opinion contents, featuring opinion pages by authors who do not have a profession or curriculum that adds value or justifies their vision.

In the case of *Mediterráneo Digital*, there are also publications taken from the media (*La Razón*, *Europa Press*, *El Mundo*, *Cadena Ser*). The volume of authors found on *Periodista Digital*, and *El Diestro* is remarkable, given that they have a large staff or many collaborators for an “alternative” website.

Table 5: number of named authors identified on each page

Web page	Total number of identified named authors (“editorial staff,” “name of the webpage” or references to the media are not included)	
	Week 14 to 20 October	Week 1 to 8 November (election campaign)
Periodista Digital	26	34
El Diestro	15	12
El Patriota	3	3
Mediterráneo Digital	4	2
El Municipio	No authors	No authors

Source: authors

We determined whether the authors coincided in both periods of analysis. *El Patriota* is the website with the highest coincidence: as three authors appeared in two samples, in *El Diestro.es*, we observe that 12 of the 18 authors appear on several occasions, while in *Periodista Digital* 19 out of 43 are the same and in *Mediterráneo Digital* only one coincidence is registered.

3.3 Content analysis: political aspects

There are general similarities in the websites' approach to contents. The PSOE and Podemos are widely criticised and satirised as opposed to Vox, which receives praise. Ciudadanos is the party that goes the most unnoticed, and the P.P. is covered more neutrally, sometimes with sympathetic overtones. This is clear in the tendency to use populist adjectives. Below are some of the examples of both extremes:

- Irene Montero's CV: Where has Pablo Iglesias' wife worked?, *Mediterráneo Digital*, 14 October 2019).
- Pedro Sánchez takes his sectarianism to the extreme by not summoning Vox to deal with Catalonia (*El Diestro*; 16 October 2019).

- Iván Espinosa, the fucking man: 'I'm going faster than a feminist to ask for a grant' (*Mediterráneo Digital*, 6 November 2019).
- Vox Makes History: Bringing together 50,000 people at Major Election Campaign Events (*ElPatriota*; 9 November 2019).

The first week of analysis focuses on the Catalan matter because it is a current event at the time. At the same time, in the election campaign, the activity on politicians, their representatives, and the electoral process itself increases in all cases. Catalonia is still present in the election week as well.

Table 6. Mentions to political parties or their members in the periods analysed. REFERENCES TO POLITICAL PARTIES OR THEIR REPRESENTATIVES

Site	Analysis period 1			Analysis period 2				
	Political party	News coverage			Political party	News Coverage		
		+	N	-		+	N	-
	Ciudadanos: 2	1	1		Ciudadanos: 9	4		5
	Podemos: 2		2	2	Podemos: 8			8
<i>Periodista Digital</i>	PSOE: 11		5	6	PSOE: 23		2	21
	PP: 8	1	7		PP: 6	5	1	
	VOX: 1	1			VOX: 15	15		
	Others (4): Barcelona en Comú, JxCat, ERC, Más País		1	3	Others (9): JxCat, ERC, PNV, CUP	8	1	
	Podemos: 2			2	Podemos: 3			3
	PSOE: 16		3	13	PSOE: 23		3	20
<i>El Diestro</i>	PP: 2	1	1		PP: 4	2	2	
	VOX: 2	2			VOX: 9	5	4	
	Others (6): Barcelona en Comú, JxCat, ERC		1	5	Ciudadanos: 1		1	
	Podemos: 1			1	Podemos: 10		1	9
	PSOE: 11			11	PSOE: 6		1	5
<i>El Patriota</i>	VOX: 21	19	2		VOX: 33	27	6	
	Others (3) Barcelona en Comú, Más País, ERC			3	Others (3) JxCat, Ciudadanos, PNV			3
	Ciudadanos				Ciudadanos: 2		2	
<i>Mediterráneo digital</i>	Podemos: 1		1		Podemos: 3			3
	PSOE: 2		1	1	PSOE: 8		3	5
	PP				PP: 3	2	1	
	VOX: 2	1			VOX: 13	11	2	
	Others (2): JxCAT, ERC		1	1	Others: Más País			1
<i>El Municipio</i>	Ciudadanos: 1			1	Ciudadanos: 1		1	
	PSOE: 2		1	1	PSOE: 2			
	VOX: 3	2	1		VOX: 1	1		
	Others (1): JxCAT,			1	PP: 2	1	1	

Source: authors

The PSOE is the most mentioned party as it receives 104 mentions; however, the media coverage of the party is negative since 83 of the 104 references to them (79%) are critical. It is followed by VOX (100 references) which, on the contrary, mainly receive positive media coverage (84 out of 100). Mentions to VOX or its speakers increase notably during the election campaigning week, rising from 29 in the first period to 71 in the week before elections. Therefore this content increases by 40%, which is reflected more in *El Patriota*, the website that covers this party the most. However, this is not the case with the PSOE, despite being the most mentioned party, going from 42 mentions in the first period to 62 in the second one.

Podemos is in third place with 30 references, most of them are critical (28 of the 30). *Periodista Digital* and *El Diestro* are the sites that make the most references to the PSOE, and *El Patriota* is the website that cites Podemos the most. Ciudadanos is the party that goes the most unnoticed, while coverage of the P.P. has a more neutral tone, sometimes with sympathetic overtones.

The references to Vox extol the heroism of its spokespeople and external figures who support it. It is identified as the only party capable of solving the Catalan conflict, and numerous contents are dedicated to advancing and analysing the election results, in which the party always comes out as victorious. Regarding the item under analysis "Attacks on Vox," it rarely appears during the October analysis, while in the campaign week, it features on all four websites, with a total of 16 related publications. The attacks come from both anonymous people, identified as extreme leftists, and from the media (*El País*, *Cadena Ser* and *El Español*) as well as journalists (Jordi Évole, Julia Otero, Susana Griso) and well-known references (Lucía Etxebarria). *El Patriota* is the site that most refers to Vox.

PSOE and Podemos are heavily criticised. Sometimes the media enters into personal issues that seek to discredit and defame the parties and their members. They are the targets of insults, and there is no distinction between information and opinion. Some headlines that might seem informative a priori contain opinions and subjective assessments. This is the case on all the websites analysed.

Remarkably, *El Diestro*, *Mediterráneo Digital*, and *Periodista Digital* question the authenticity of the electoral process in several news items, no doubt alarmists, they refer to hacking, vote theft, coercion, and suspicion. Democratic functioning seems to be questioned, as shown in the following examples:

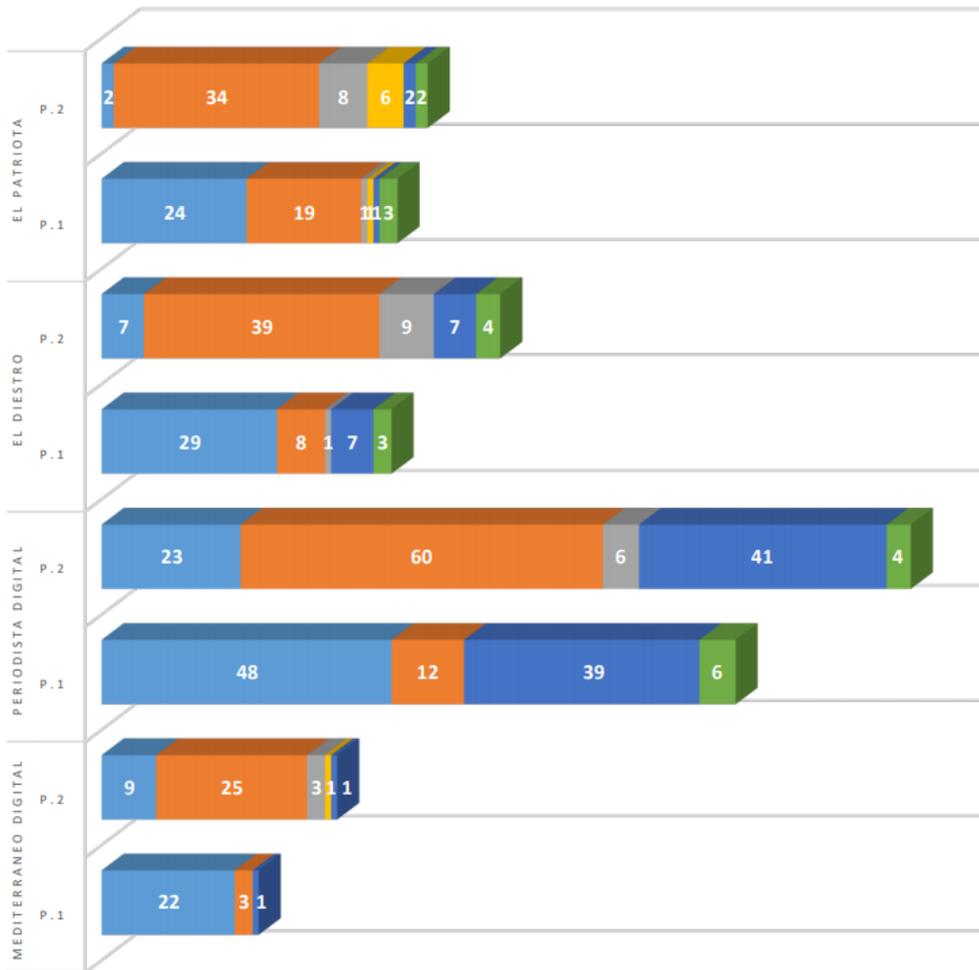
- Failure or hacking? The collapse of the postal vote due to a "computer error" throughout Spain. (*Mediterráneo Digital*; 8 November 2019).
- Here we go! Mail order votes stolen from a wallet (*Mediterráneo Digital*; 9 November 2019).
- Denunciation of "electoral fraud" in 28-A admitted for processing (*Periodista Digital*; 1 November 2019).
- The Transparent Election Platform is going to carry out a parallel election recount; if you want to collaborate, these are the instructions (*El Diestro*; 9 November 2019).

Graph 1: Total contents according to the items analyzed

(P.1=October sample/P.2=November sample)

Content breakdown by page and analysis simple





Source: authors

In the category of others, *Periodista digital* refers to the Royal House, in particular, Queen Letizia is mentioned in critical headlines before her institutional period. This page, together with *El Patriota* and *El Diestro*, feature items that criticise opinion leaders' attitudes such as the journalists Xavier Xardá's, Antonio García Ferreras', or Pilar Rahola's.

There are also publications aimed at specific groups such as the *Guardia Civil* or National Police, which seek support instead of providing information. These contents are almost always related to their intervention in Catalonia.

There are few publications on immigration. However, the coverage of the information in these publications is not objective, as is the case in "Iván Espinosa humiliates Susanna Griso live and shows that immigrants are more likely to rape" or "Vox supports the citizen who shot at the Maghreb who broke into his house in Murcia: "He is a brave man," published by *Diario Patriota*.

False information that is discredited by the verifier "*Maldito Buló*", such as "The report that Abascal speaks of yes, most of those condemned in the *manadas* are foreigners" published by *Mediterráneo Digital* on 5 November, refers to the false information provided by Santiago Abascal in the electoral debate or the previously mentioned "The denunciation of the "electoral fraud" on 28-A admitted for processing (*Periodista Digital*; 1 November 2019).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Throughout this work the influence of junk news and disinformation media on election campaigns has been analysed, a specific study on two periods of analysis was carried out: a random week in October 2019 and the election campaign week before the 10 November 2019 elections. Spanish pages that usually distribute junk content were identified by the Junk News Aggregator tool from the Oxford Internet Institute. In other words, partisan, ideologically extremist, and propagandistic information. However, after referring to previous research, this first filter lacks sites such as *Caso Aislado*, *Diario de Sevilla*, or *La Gaceta*, among others, previously registered by other experts due to their disinformative activity, as stated in the theoretical framework.

A second filter has been applied on Similar Web to limit the content analysis to the most significant websites. It can be seen that the traffic to these pages is mainly direct, and when it comes from social networks, Facebook and Twitter are the platforms that have the biggest audiences.

The contents usually have an anonymous byline such as "news editorial staff" or the name of the media. In some cases, there is such a high number of collaborators, as is the case of *Periodista Digital*, which is unrealistic for an independent and small media outlet. There are also fake identities who pretend to be journalists, which has already been reported by the media. It should be noted that authors rarely coincide in both periods of analysis.

Although there is an increase in campaign activity, it is not particularly significant. However, the five websites publish an average of 42.7 daily items, which may contain disinformation during the campaign period. The thematic agenda is altered, increasing the content in the electoral period related to political parties and mentions to them.

Catalonia is one of the critical issues in both periods, and on all websites, it is always covered from the perspective of conflict that serves to highlight the government's incompetence. The government is alleged to be unable to find a solution, and there is said to be a lack of proposals and initiatives from other political parties.

In the content analysis, it is evident that the pages analysed publish items that feature characteristics typical of agitation propaganda, which seek to favour Vox and reinforce its followers, either by criticizing or satirising other parties or by praising their own party, whose coverage increases by 40% during the election campaign. The alleged physical and verbal attacks on both its spokespersons and its supporters appear frequently. Whereas, Vox and its supporters are praised for their courage and bravery for offering alternatives to current policies. There could be correlations or even direct links to Vox's political discourse since the party has a brand of clothing called "The Patriot," coinciding with the name of the site that most refers to the party. The website does not indicate that it is a Vox media or, at least, related to it. This conclusion correlates with the study by Hernández and Fernández (2019) that established connections between the site *Caso Aislado* and Vox.

This disinformation media's propagandistic approach is demonstrated. However, it would be interesting to study the impact of these junk contents on social networks in the future as well as the interactions generated by them. As we have discussed in the theoretical framework, junk news, not only interferes in the electoral processes but also reduces public debate and limits it to those topics that can benefit their backers.

One might think that categorising these web pages as disinformative to be excessive. However, some elements make this evident, such as taking on the appearance, structure, and the same development as a media outlet so that the audience interprets the contents as such. However, a detailed analysis of the authorship of the works and how the political information is focused has allowed us to identify partisan and propaganda objectives. It is not, therefore, a question of media that sporadically publishes malicious news, but rather publications are sequenced which respond to a political content strategy. In this work, three different periods of analysis are examined (the period determined by Junk News Aggregator and the two applied in the fieldwork), Junk News was found in all periods.

On the other hand, the present study shows that the websites analysed tend to benefit the "right-wing" parties. More work could be done to broaden the sample, the periods of research, and the interactions on their social networks to determine whether they are coordinated and to identify whether other sites carry out similar practices in favour of "left-wing" parties.

Finally, we must highlight that the contents that question the transparency of the electoral process were found. Democratic and social welfare must be taken into account; therefore, it would be appropriate to study these types of publications from the perspective of the study of beliefs in the future, to determine whether junk news and disinformation media are contributing to generating social polarisation.

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